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The Digital Access Show - Season 4 Episode 42: A Season in Review

Introduction

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[Narelle] Hi, welcome to the last episode of The Digital Access Show for this year. We've had an interesting year. We've had some fantastic guests. And I wanna end it, unfortunately, I couldn't get both directors of DASAT on the show today. Allan's… currently I'm not sure where. He's flying all over Australia, I think. But we do have our CEO, Mark Muscat, from Digital Access Solutions. Mark, thank you.

[Mark] Thanks, Narelle. I'm just a director.

The Year of AI

[Narelle] No, yeah, well, I'll roll my eyes though. But listen, it's been an interesting year, hasn't it? Because we've had some fantastic guests on. We've covered a lot of different things with the show, but there's been lots of changes in the technology industry that are affecting assistive technology tools, isn't there?

[Mark] Yeah. I think… this year will probably be remembered for the… artificial intelligence…

[Narelle] Yeah.

[Mark] Breakthrough or… shift I would call it probably. Artificial intelligence has been around for, you know, a few years and many decades before, But… you know, in the capacity that we've all come to know, it certainly probably has broken through more so this year. It's now… It's now a major component in a lot of things that we do as… people with disabilities. And in terms of accessibility, it's now becoming, you know, quite significant. I think we've seen the trend… over the last few years with various apps… on phones, and now we're seeing them come to desktop, and computer

tablets, and such like. So, yeah, probably… probably significant change in… the way we conduct ourselves with assistive technology has been… definitely around artificial intelligence, and the way that AI is now making a big… significant role in our lives.

Can AI Replace Assistive Technology?

[Narelle] One of the interesting things that I see a lot lately… is, and I know you're seeing it too because we've discussed it, is how many people think… artificial intelligence can replace the screen readers, that we use in the braille devices. Can it?

[Mark] No. No, not… The short answer is no, because there… There is always going to be a need for… the use of assistive technology to actually… give us… an understanding of what, you know, the layout, the formatting of various documents, the structure of a spreadsheet, the number of items in the… in the inbox or the calendar that we're looking at and working on. Artificial intelligence is… a good shortcut to some of those things where, you know, for summaries and so forth, but… when it comes to us actually thinking for ourselves, that's where assistive technology is still prominent. So, you know, for me at this stage, I use artificial intelligence as a tool, but I don't allow it to think for me. I don't use Siri a great deal, or the Android equivalent, you know, Google, because I'd still rather be able to access my own messages, make up my own mind, make up my own thoughts in what I'm actually looking at. So, yeah, I think there's still a high need for assistive technology.

[Narelle] And you've made…

-[Mark] Sorry.

-[Narelle] Go on, Mark.

[Mark] And with AI, it certainly has made workflows a lot more structured, but it doesn't give us the, you know, ability to actually… do these… thinking processes.

Image-Based PDFs and Legal Accessibility

[Narelle] Yeah. AI is an interesting one, isn't it? Because I, at the start of the year, if you'd told me that I'd use AI to the level I've been using it, I would have been astounded. But… I'm finding it really handy for things like formatting, which, because I can miss things with formatting, I miss them quite easily. But it's more to the point, sometimes it's putting those words in the way. And yeah, I've trained AI to use my… writing style and things like that. But I'm with you in that it can't replace assistive technology. But I think the other area that AI can't replace… at the present time… is when you get image-based PDFs. And AI will have a really good try at converting it into… a readable format. It's still not legal, is it?

[Mark] No. We've had, we've had one case within our own company that's been a personal legal case. And we've had subsequent cases of clients that have had similar situations where they've been presented… legal documents, and there's obviously been, you know, some arguments in a legal tribunal where… this has not been accepted in terms of procedural fairness. And the end result… has been that, you know, that certain entities were told that, no, you have to present accessible documentation to that person. So, yeah, we have seen that, and you know, AI could have been used, and was used, but it's no certainty. There's a lot of, you know, ambiguities about AI and its uses in that context. We're not talking about just reading a letter from Aunty May. We're talking about legal documents that need to be processed, need to be responded to. So, yeah, there was… Yeah, that was tested in a tribunal, and it was found to be wanting. So, that was a very learning experience… for all of us, I think.

[Narelle] Yeah.

Smart Glasses, Privacy and Security

[Mark] But, you know, that, it was clear that, yes, AI is a tool, but it's not the end to… what some people might think it is. It's the same with the… the ability to use AI to… scan things, you know, with Meta glasses and other forms of glasses. There's been a lot of legal to-ing and fro-ing about those. I think that's going to continue to go on with privacy and… security and all that sort of, those particular options that

we need to take into consideration. So, when you look at it, it's not just about assistive technology. We're just one cog in the mechanisms of society. And, you know, that needs to, obviously, you know, obviously, you know, we need to be speaking for ourselves, but we also need to be able to listen to other groups that may have concerns about security and all that. And those of us who, you know, I'm not a parent, but those who are parents, and have concerns about children being, you know, in a particular footage that a blind person may take, well, they have a right to be concerned, and that's something that we need to take on board as well. So, yeah. Things like that, I think, will still continue. I think that's going to be an everlasting… discussion while that technology is there. I'd hate to see the technology go, because I use it like you, Narelle, And it's been very useful, especially finding out buttons on devices and… and such like, but there are obviously legal ramifications of… the use of those particular pieces of… AI and assistive technology in combination. So, yeah, again, we need to be aware of… the various cogs in that particular… aspect, so yeah. It's an interesting one.

Using AI to Build Accessible Websites

[Narelle] Yeah. The other thing that has been interesting, again, you and I have had a few discussions about this as well, is the fact that people are using AI to build websites, and to build accessible websites. However, there's still that… part of the website… that has to be double checked, and checked correctly, because… there's a lot of things that AI can't do yet.

[Mark] No, that's true. But I've got to say one thing. AI do build… much more accessible websites than I've seen… some humans do. And I mean, it's… Not in general, but I've seen some really nice… attempts in people using Google scripts and… Gemini to actually design some decent accessible websites. Wherever they conform with the WCAG, I don't think they care. They're just small clubs and small, you know, entities, but… Considering that their audience is actually low vision and blind, they've actually done a fairly reasonable job. You know, would I leave an audit? Probably not. But I think you're right to say that, you know, when you use any tool like AI or… any form of, you know, development, you should still get it checked by, obviously, human testers. After all, it is humans that are needing to use

those websites. And… Perhaps if it's a serious website that needs, you know, some sort of form of certification, yeah, a decent audit should be conducted. I… Yeah, I must admit I've played with, and the thing that AI does well is… it does all that level of coding that makes the websites and web pages accessible. Stuff that developers would balk at, because it would just take them more hours to do. So, is it a tool? Yes, absolutely. It's a great tool for that purpose. Is it the end all? No, I don't think so. I think you use the AI to help with making it accessible. It's actually a pretty good tool to do, or use. But you still need to check it. Like you said, you need to get a pair of human eyes. Somebody with some language skills to actually check it for, you know, proper contextual language for neurodiversity, and… people with intellectual impairments to make sure that it's basic… You know, things like that are essential to still maintain. The only way we're going to do that is to keep… doing what we do.

-[Narelle] Yeah.

-[Mark] Yeah.

Frequent Assistive Technology Updates

[Narelle] The other thing that… I've really been watching and found interesting… this year is the number of updates that have been happening. It feels like a lot more this year than it has for a while, for the screen readers, for the braille devices. It feels like every second day there's another update come in. And I know that's an exaggeration, but… couple that with the amount of updating… of other applications, such as Microsoft, it is really an issue, isn't it, for many people that use assistive technology?

[Mark] I think the way that things are going, we certainly have accelerated in… in the way that… IT is now running. It's no longer… a case of, you know, It takes months to get a development of a new version, or an update to occur. I think these things are a lot more dynamic. And I think… I think there's a lot of… need for the AT providers to keep up to date, and also be equally as dynamic. I think that's why you find a lot of minor updates and patches. And… But obviously, we've seen some major updates from both… JAWS and NVDA in the last couple of weeks. Some of

those have been very much, you know, appreciated, because they've been updates that have been required or needed over the last year. And obviously there's still some gaps that, you know, still are happening with different applications, such as Microsoft 365.

[Narelle] Yeah.

[Mark] But yeah, I think you'll find that these things will… these things will happen. So, I think that that's just the way we are finding ourselves now. So, yeah. Consistent movement. Yeah.

Growing Awareness and Disability Discrimination Act Reviews

[Narelle] Yeah. I mean, it's definitely, digital accessibility is really seeming to… be getting more prominence this year. More people are talking about it, which is wonderful. Linked to that is the Disability Discrimination Act review, both federally and a number of states, Queensland, I think Tasmania, and I think WA, don't quote me on that. And that's a welcome part too, because some of the changes they're looking at… are only going to make life better for people trying to access information.

[Mark] I think there's also a degree of awareness… that's happening as well. And that's coming across from people putting in, you know, feedback. Also, people actually, you know, using products, exploring with new products, and working with developers. But I also think it's a case of developers now… realising that there is a bigger audience when you do have… accessibility implemented. I think that's now becoming more prominent. But, yeah, look, conversely there are still some apps that need to… need to have a lot more work on them… to actually become, you know, more useful and accessible. But yeah, it's… something definitely over the last 12 months. There is a trend towards that.

Microsoft 365 and Google Accessibility

[Narelle] One of the things I've been enjoying is Microsoft. We use, obviously, Microsoft 365. And it is mostly not too bad for accessibility now. I can get in. I can

read my emails. I can hop onto Copilot, use that. And it is, mostly, pretty good for accessibility. And when… an app or a website is accessible, people do use it more, so you're right.

[Mark] Yeah. I think there's still room to improve with Microsoft, but I think generally there is a trend towards, you know, the… platforms, particularly the online platforms, which have always been it's always been… it's always been questionable. And… So, the problem with… The problem with Microsoft is always being, you know, that… we've been using the desktop apps… on an ongoing basis, and a lot of us actually still prefer to use the desktop apps, but the online versions have always been… tricky to use in the context of getting around, navigating quickly and so forth. But that's improved over the last, I wouldn't say the last year, that's probably more over the last… three months or so to be honest. And I know, I mean, I've heard from clients have had problems, but the online versions have improved. So, I still think there's room to be… room for more improvement, but… I'm starting to get, I wouldn't say more confident about Microsoft Online products, but yeah, they're starting to actually, you know, certainly be… useful and… somewhat, you know, worthwhile considering. So, yeah, I'd like to see what happens over the next year with Microsoft… 365. But the other one I've been playing with is the Google Suite, which I've been… quite happy with virtually. And they're, they're making inroads with accessibility on that front. So, in particular, you know, not just the Google Mail, and the Google calendars and all that, but there's also a lot of work that's being done with the… Gemini and the administration side of things. So, it's definitely, you know, I'm seeing… vast improvement in that area as well. So, you know, the… Next year will be interesting to see how the online… platforms go… for us as people who… who use AT.

People with Disability in the Community

[Narelle] Yeah. The other thing that I'm really loving… is we're seeing a lot more people with disability out, about, and just being part of the community. And I was reflecting on that… last week with some friends. And growing up, obviously I'm a bit older than you, growing up, we never saw people with disability in the community. It was really odd. Now it's just, we're everywhere, and it's just normal, isn't it? You

don't think anything if you see someone in a wheelchair, a power wheelchair or… Everyone just goes about their business. And I think… the more… people see us out and about, living life, the more they see that we are just normal people, we just do things differently, I think the more accepting the community becomes as a whole.

[Mark] I… don't… I think there's some room to be made in some social aspects, I think there's still… I think there's some… areas that need to be looked at. And that comes from accessibility in general, but I think there's also still… awareness that needs to still occur. I mean, I haven't actually seen much of discrimination in… things that I've been doing or want to do, but I still have heard of people saying… that they're not sure, or they're not feeling included in certain things. So, I think it's probably… Online, I agree. I think there's more improvement that has happened online with… people joining groups and… That's probably now becoming more prominent, because some of the social media… platforms have become a little bit more accessible. Then again, you know, we've had, I think we've seen Facebook go up and down a couple of times… with this level of accessibility, which has been rather amusing. And yeah, cause sometimes it's a case of, what's Facebook gonna give me today? Is it gonna be accessible or is it just gonna be rubbish? Yeah, and I think that's… one of the most interesting social media things. I think, yeah, so you gotta be… I think we've gotta be a little bit careful when we say that… people are included. I think… there are some people who don't necessarily agree with that, but I think there's also the potential that people will, if they want to explore that, they can… certainly now get into certain areas that they want to explore. And I think that's now becoming more… possible because of the… availability through technology and accessibility. So, yeah. The rest of it, I don't know.

-[Narelle] Yeah.

-[Mark] Yeah.

[Mark] That's, yeah, that's why, I mean, you can run a whole forum on that alone. I think that would be worthwhile.

-[Mark] But…

-[Narelle] Yeah.

Looking Ahead to Next Year

[Narelle] The next year, what's happening in DASAT for the next year? More of the same? We keep working away?

[Mark] I think for the next year, it's going to get interesting… to see… how… the accessibility goes coming up to the 2032 Olympics. We would hope that, we've got five years to go, almost. So, that would be interesting to see how that goes. And I think there will be… I'd like to see some general improvements in accessibility, in Australia to be honest. In terms of access to… services online, shopping in particular, travel, I still feel that there's still a lot of… There's a lot of work that needs to be done with travel. Booking flights and transport seems to be getting there, but… as I found out during this year, booking a bus still is a problem, in Queensland anyway. And I think you and I had a chat about that.

[Narelle] Yes, we did.

[Mark] There needs to be some sort of… improvement in the travel and tourism, I feel. And there's areas that we… do need to have access to. And, yeah, I'd like to hear from other people, to be honest. It's not about me, it's not about you, Narelle. It's about people in general, really. You know, some people talk to me about games, and I'm not a gaming person, but I think I can appreciate the fact that people want… accessible games and, you know, that's a fair thing to consider. So, games, travel, tourism, you know, various pieces of, I don't know, work with shopping still. I think some of the shopping centres, for me, I hate shopping centres, because they're just really hard to get around. So, I think there's been some work with… BindiMaps and other companies of that, in that area. But yeah, I'd like to see that improve.

[Narelle] Yeah.

[Mark] I wonder how AI is going to pan out in the end with that, being able to work with, because at the moment, you know, AI can describe what's around you, but it'd

be nice to have AI work with augmented reality as well. That could be an interesting trend if that happens.

Closing Thoughts

[Narelle] That's, yeah. And this is it. I mean, we've got new logos next year, everyone. We're having a new logo for DASAT, and for The Digital Access Show. Yeah, I just told Mark, and he just said just do whatever you like. He can't see. And… we are going to keep going with… highlighting digital accessibility, highlighting the use of assistive technology tools, and highlighting the fact that for good communication to happen, everyone's got to be able to access the information. It can't happen if… the information is not accessible. So, Mark, thank you. Thanks again for this year. Mark and I have… done yelling at each other and… disagreeing and agreeing…

[Mark] Might do some more interviews myself.

[Narelle] Yeah, Mark, actually, the one where you went and saw, talked to Matthew Horsfall, that was a really great one. Yeah, I love it. And look, for everyone else, have a great Christmas, and a really safe New Year from everyone at DASAT, and the Digital Access Show.

[Mark] Have a good Christmas.

[Narelle] We'll see you in the new year. We might even go and play some old episodes. We might play the Matthew Horsfall one, actually. And just for people to go and keep track of, and see what's happening and reflect on. See you next year. Bye bye. [music playing]